

friars, and not the parish priests, who were singled out as having a lower standard than even laymen.

Any estimate of the value of the Church in England at this period must be largely determined by an appreciation of the religious ideas and beliefs which she actually propagated. If it appears that the friars and prelates both used their influence to increase rather than diminish superstition, the radically Presbyterian attitude which the reformer and his followers adopted in the matter of Church organisation will not be hard to understand. Men do not construct theories of ecclesiastical government for their amusement, but arrive at them by a process of observation and practical experience.

The character and quantity of religious instruction given by a parish priest to his flock must have depended to a very great degree on the priest himself, and in consequence varied greatly in different cases. He was expected to study the Latin Bible diligently himself, but to instruct the people in Church doctrine as exemplified by the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Ave Maria, the Pater Noster; the six works of mercy, the seven virtues and the seven deadly sins were also usual texts for the preacher. This was the curriculum laid down by the episcopal authority. In the next generation, when the Wycliffite movement was at death-grips with the Catholic Church, the Primate actually forbade discourses on any other text or subject.¹ But it must be remembered that these topics were capable of almost indefinite expansion by the preacher. The art of getting from one subject to another completely different was highly developed in the Middle Ages. Within the pale of the Catholic Church the pulpit gave the greatest opportunity for the development of individual ideas, not to say heresies. It was because it was at once the freest, and, with the possible exception of the confessional, the most potent religious influence, that Wycliffe chose the pulpit as the natural weapon of reformation, and laid such great stress on the necessity for more preaching, and again more

¹ Wilkins, iii. 59; Gibson, f. 382-4 • E. E. T. S., *Religious Pieces*, Pan Gaytryge's Sermon.